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The value of religious clubs on Utah's college campuses

By Trent Toone | ttoone@deseretnews.com | Jan 15, 2020, 10:00pm MDT

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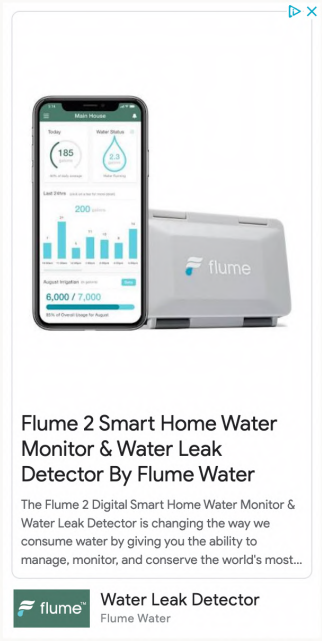
A group of Muslim men, including students who belong to the Utah State University Student Association Muslim Students Club, attend a prayer service at the Logan Islamic Center on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020. | Trent Toone, Deseret News | Purchase Photo

LOGAN — Mubarak Ukashat says he ended up at Utah State University by "accident."

Years ago in the Middle East, the Nigerian college student began corresponding with a USU professor while researching his thesis. They became friends and the professor invited Ukashat to the Cache Valley campus for a visit. Three years ago, Ukashat enrolled to get his doctorate degree.

While living far from home in a different culture with the frigid Utah winters, Ukashat has found comfort in associating with other members of his faith in the USUSA Muslim Students Club.



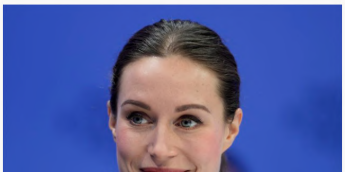


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Mubarak Ukashat, Huzeyfe Kocabas and Umar-Farooq Abdulwahab, members of the Utah State University Muslim Students Club, talk after a prayer service at the Logan Islamic Center on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020. | Laura Seitz, Deseret News | Purchase Photo

"Living with people of different faiths, it's hard. Most of us come from other countries and ... the media has people thinking Muslims are terrorists and bad people. We're actually peaceful people, normal students who do homework together," Ukashat said. "What brings us together is our religion, Islam."

Ukashat's experience with the USU Muslim Students Club illustrates the value of religious clubs on Utah college campuses. Impact Campus Ministries at the University of Utah and the Converts Club at Brigham Young University are among many religious clubs at universities in the state that provide support for students during a pivotal time of their lives.

USU Muslim students

Each Friday at 1 p.m., as many as 50 Muslim men, mostly students, faculty and staff at Utah State, gather at the Logan Islamic Center near 700 North and 600 East for afternoon prayer. After listening to short remarks, the men stand in rows shoulder-to-shoulder before kneeling in prayer.

Among the group are a handful of graduate students who are members of the USUSA Muslim Students Club, including the president, Ukashat; Umar-Farooq Abdulwahab, the club's secretary; Moazzam Ali, the financial secretary; and Huzeyfe Kocabas.

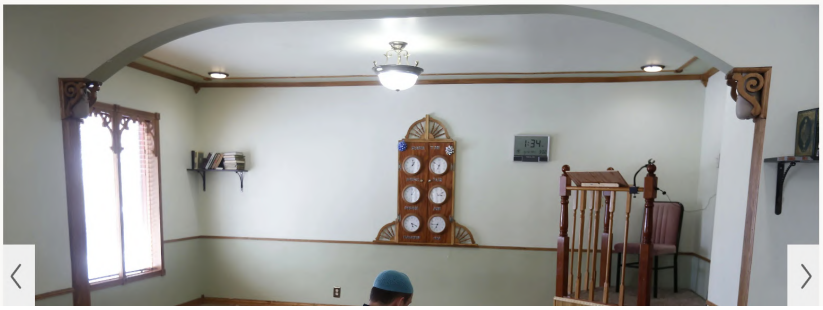
The prayer service is a religious rite, not a club activity, but still serves to bring club members and others together. The club doesn't have a place on campus to call home yet, so they are grateful the Islamic Center is close by.

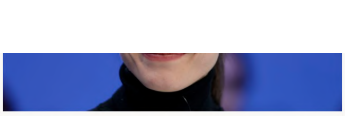
"I like bringing people together," Ukashat said. "It's a cool thing to have Muslim students come together and be comforted."

Ukashat says there are as many as 30 students registered in the club and they are always recruiting. In addition to assembling for prayer each Friday, the club also meets on the last Saturday of each month, Ukashat said.

After prayers last Friday, club members talked about planning a hike.

"For me, the Muslim Club is an avenue to get to meet our Muslim students," said Abdulwahab, also from Nigeria.





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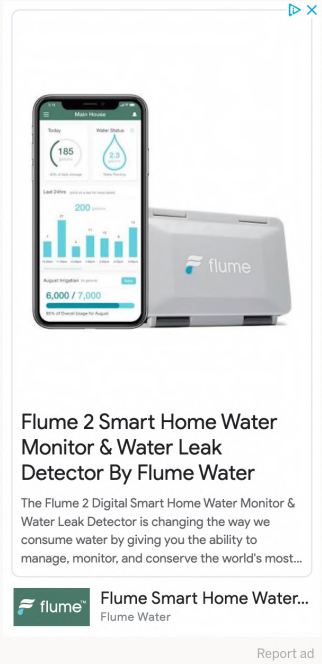
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Huzeyfe Kocabas, a member of the Utah State University Muslim Students Club, prays at the Logan Islamic Center on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020. | Laura Seitz, Deseret News | Purchase Photo 1 of 3



With the holy month of Ramadan approaching, Ali, a doctorate student from Pakistan, is looking forward to coordinated club dinners after fasting.

"Staying together helps us feel like a family instead of isolated," Ali said. "It's good to be



Huzeyfe Kocabas, a member of the Utah State University Muslim Students Club, prays at the Logan Islamic Center on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020. | Laura Seitz, Deseret News | Purchase Photo 1 of 3



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"Staying together helps us feel like a family instead of isolated," Ali said. "It's good to be together, work and spend time together."

For more information on the USUSA Muslim club, visit its Facebook page.

Impact Campus Ministries

Blake Burns, a 22-year-old graduate student at the University of Utah, connected with Campus Minister and Pastor Tommy White with Impact Campus Ministries during a challenging freshman year.



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“I got involved with Impact during a really low point in my life,” Burns said. “Being involved helped me get through that low period and find joy again.”

Not only did Burns find a community of like-minded Christian believers, but he found strength in developing his own faith and had a meaningful experience leading a gospel lesson for the first time. Activities with free food is also a perk, he added.

“I felt it was a milestone in my faith to be moving from a student to a teacher and knowing I had the confidence and know-how to do that,” Burns said. “I really appreciate having a group of friends that share the same faith as me and having the ability to meet every week to discuss and further our understanding of the Bible.”

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The prayer service is a religious rite, not a club activity, but still serves to bring club members and others together. The club doesn’t have a place on campus to call home yet, so they are grateful the Islamic Center is close by.

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Ukashat says there are as many as 30 students registered in the club and they are always recruiting. In addition to assembling for prayer each Friday, the club also meets on the last Saturday of each month, Ukashat said.



Young adults and college students gather on campus on Monday night for dinner, prayer and Bible study with Impact Campus Ministries. | Justin Wallace



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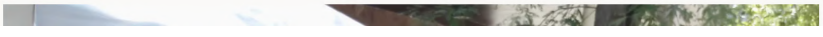
Impact Campus Ministries is a “Jesus-centered Christian community” for college students and young adults, according to Utah.edu.

Since coming to Salt Lake City in 2008, Impact Ministries has helped students at the University of Utah, Westminster College and Salt Lake Community College. They meet off campus each Monday for dinner, prayer and Bible study. On Thursdays they set up a tent outside the Student Union Building and offer an ethnic dish to international students as an act of fellowship, said Pastor White, also a part-time staff member of Southeast Christian Church.

Getting involved with Impact has helped Abi DeSchiffart, a senior with a double major in biomedical engineering and ballet performance, to meet new people and feel part of a “community.”

“It’s been a great way to be supported and challenged in our faith. I have found mentors and friends through this program. The weekly meetings are a great way to meet people that you otherwise would not interact with due to differences in study disciplines or walks of life,” DeSchiffart said. “I appreciate how much I feel genuinely known, supported and cared for by this group of people. ... It has been a constant for me during the past four years.”

Robert Swoboda, a sophomore majoring in biochemistry from Twin Falls, Idaho, agrees that participation in the club has been a blessing. Through Impact Campus Ministries he’s been paired up with mentors who have helped him to navigate the stresses of college life while staying grounded in his faith. He wishes most students would disconnect from social media and give religion clubs a try.





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Members of Impact Campus Ministries set up a tent Thursday outside the University of Utah's Student Union Building to share a treat with international students. | Pastor Tommy White

"It's a group of loving people who will support you through whatever trials you're going through in life," Swoboda said. "A lot of college students miss out. These kinds of groups bring people together, which I think is important in this day and age."

Coming to Utah and being involved with the Christian club may have helped Swoboda find his calling in life. The Idaho native is strongly considering medical school and programs like Doctors Without Borders, where he can serve and make a difference. His experience with Impact helped solidify it, he said.

"This is what I've been called to do ... God's purpose for me," Swoboda said. "And I've had a lot of people who are encouraging me along the way."

BYU Converts Club

Michael Shukis converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after a positive experience with a Latter-day Saint Boy Scout troop in his hometown of Redding, California.

But when he first came to BYU, Shukis felt alone and struggled to make friends. About two years ago he recalls having a discussion with another new Latter-day Saint about an idea of starting a club primarily for converts. They realized there was a need for new members to come together, discuss beliefs and support one another.

No such club existed then, but it does now, Shukis said.



Members of Brigham Young University's Converts Club. | BYU Converts Club

"You find a lot of strength in coming together and sharing similar experiences," he said.

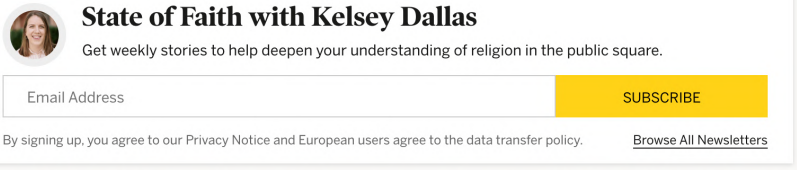
In less than two years, the BYU Converts Club has grown to about 50 members with a variety of faith backgrounds. The vast majority are from outside the state. Shukis has only met one from Utah.

One club member is Sai Maddali, a student from Georgia whose family immigrated to the United States from India. He joined the church after being raised in a family heritage of Hinduism, according to LDSLiving.com.

"We all come from different paths filled with sacrifice, but especially for our converts, there is a long journey of continually adapting to the unique lifestyle that is within the church," Maddali said in the article. "Being a convert goes much further and longer than our baptism."

The club meets regularly to socialize, have fun, strengthen one another through discussions they call "convert conversations," and share conversion stories. The club is always looking to find new club members. For more information, visit their Facebook page.

"When we go around and ask 'Who is a convert?' a surprising amount of hands shoot up," Shukis said. "Not only students, but a lot of faculty members joined early in life as well."

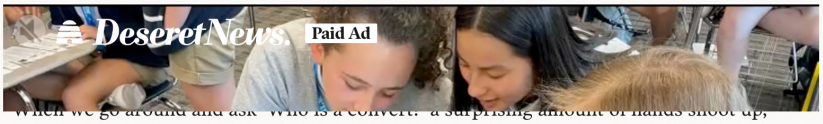


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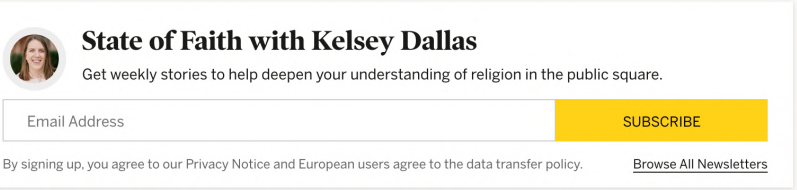
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